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ABSTRACT

An advanced composition curriculum was designed for a class of 20 juniors and seniors, and because of the constraints of a university grant with which it was associated, the majority of assignments had to be collaborative. The subject of investigation was composition. That is, the students were challenged to do what composition researchers and theorists do: investigate the nature of written discourse and build theories from the investigation. The course began with individual students writing their own case histories which discussed how the student actually goes about composing a text. Next, after being assigned to groups, the students read and discussed the papers and began their collaborative research. A great deal of self-reflexiveness is built into this model, since students must investigate a crucial component of their intellectual development. Furthermore, students must engage in dialogue about language and must write about writing; consequently, they are immersed in a high level of metalanguage. Students' findings indicate: (1) that no consistent composing process is employed by any of the students, and whatever process is employed is inextricably tied to its efficacy in attaining an acceptable grade; (2) that many continue to procrastinate and rely on "all-nighters" at the computer; and (3) that there is a correlation between interest in the course and the amount of effort expended in writing. The value of collaborative research on composition is threefold: (1) having students investigate their writing practices provides context for the advanced composition course; (2) by placing their work in the context of research students share the authority for creating knowledge; and (3) through engaging in a process of "reflective practice" students are examining their discourse from a heightened perspective, and hopefully using their research as an impetus for change. (HB)

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A Community of Composition Theorists and Researchers: Collaborative Research and Theory Building in an Advanced Composition Course

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One of the problems confronted by someone assigned to teach an advanced composition class at the college level (and by "advanced" I mean a class generally restricted to juniors and seniors who need to fulfill an upper-division writing requirement) is providing what Patricia Bizzell has called "the 'C' word" (1)--that is, "content." An advanced composition course tends to be a rather amorphous entity: some argue it should be tailored for specific majors (a "writing for engineers" or "writing for accountants" class); others promote an emphasis on refining students' style, contending that content is irrelevant; and some believe the advanced composition class should be issues oriented, focusing on a sociopolitical agenda. Faced with teaching such a shapeless course, I was challenged to design a curriculum appropriate to the writing needs of juniors and seniors. However, because this course was associated with a university grant to study the effects of collaborative learning, one stipulation existed: the majority of the writing assignments had to be collaborative--in other words, groups of three or four students would be required to compose their work together. Thus, I had to not only provide the content and structure for this advanced writing course, but also had to design writing assignments that would be demanding and rich enough to lend themselves to collaboration. The result was a composition course in which the subject was indeed composition--it seemed that the only way to provide substantive content that would be analyzed in a collaborative context was to have students do what we as composition researchers and theorists do: investigate the nature of written discourse in various contexts and build theories from our investigation. The rest of this paper will cover three areas: first, I will describe how this particular advanced writing class was structured, providing examples of the assignments used; second, I will discuss the theory underlying such a class; and third, I will present some of the findings from the students' research.

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Description of the Collaborative Writing Project

English 301C, the course in which this particular collaborative curriculum was incorporated, is a class reserved for juniors and seniors, most of whom are education or journalism majors. (Science and business majors take advanced writing courses specifically designed for composing in their particular fields.) The class ceiling in 301C is 20 students, as there are only 20 Macintosh or IBM computers in each of the particular computer classroom, and students sit on movable chairs at one of five round tables. Thus, the class size and layout facilitates a collaborative environment.

During the first week of the course, the class is reintroduced to certain components of the writing process--such as invention, planning, drafting, revising, and responding--so that they have a working vocabulary with which to approach their case studies. The first writing project (see attached "Writing Assignment #1: Case Study of Your Own Writing Process") asks them to reflect on their college writing careers thus far--most of them have had a first-year composition course and have engage in some writing in courses across the disciplines. (One of the benefits of this assignment is that it allows the composition teacher a window into just what kind of writing is occurring across the curriculum.) The rationale underlying this first assignment is threefold: It offers a rather nonthreatening reinitiation to the writing process by allowing them to discuss issues close to their personal experience; it stimulates thinking by asking them to reflect on a component of their college education (one purpose the advanced comp class should serve is to allow students to reflect on the process of their education); and it serves as a bridge to the next assignment by providing material from which the collaborative groups can draw general assertions and theories about the writing processes of their peers.

After students complete their individual case studies, I place them into groups according to a number of criteria (their age, gender, major, and especially their schedule), and they remain in these groups for the rest of the quarter. The class discusses the nature of group dynamics and so forth, and then students are asked to read Kate Ronald and Jon Volkmer's article "Another Competing Theory of Process: The Student's" as an frame for interpreting their group members' case studies. In this article, Volkmer and Ronald argue that composition specialists, in their efforts

to construct models of how writing processes should function in ideal situations, have overlooked how students themselves actually go about composing a text. From studying students' accounts of their own composing processes, Volkmer and Ronald assert that "we find that contemporary composing theories have distressingly little relevance to the way students write, whether for composition classes using the process approach or courses outside of composition in which papers are typically assigned and due without any attention to writing" (84). They found that a more accurate characterization of the student writer is one who

1) WONDERS what the teacher really wants
2) PROCRASTINATES until the night before the writing is done
3) SUFFERS guilt and dread, making a handwritten draft
4) TYPES trying to catch errors
5) JUDGES according to the GRADE assigned to the writing the worth of
    a) the writing (unconfident student)
    b) the teacher (confident student)

(93)

I have also found it useful for students to read Elizabeth Flynn's "Composing as a Woman" to provide another dimension in the theory-building process. By adding Flynn's notion of how gender influences the composing process, students must not only examine how the writing of juniors and seniors is shaped by context, but how it is influenced by gender as well. In addition, teachers hoping to incorporate this project into their own classrooms might want to have students read and discuss the article "Cross-Curricular Underlife," a study of discourse in various courses across the disciplines undertaken by students in Susan Miller's honors composition class at Utah. Thus, students are introduced to collaborative research as a process of integration--together they must construct knowledge by considering and synthesizing a number of sources. The official assignment for this first collaborative writing project contains some guidelines (see attached), but students are allowed freedom in determining the presentational format of their findings.

Practical and Theoretical Rationales for Collaborative Research of Writing Processes in an Advanced Composition Class

Collaborative studies of writing processes are effective, I believe, because they fit well within the boundaries of what constitutes successful collaborative writing. Generally, for a collaborative writing project to be successful, it has to meet these three criteria:

> 1. The problem that generates the project must be authentic and relevant to the students' experiences.
>
> 2. The project should lend itself to genuine collaborative writing, that is, when composing such writing, "A group of writers sits together and plans, drafts, and revises a piece of writing, which thus becomes a single response to the assignment" (Klein Sills 25). Too often, students in the collaborative classroom will adopt a "divide and conquer" strategy in which each student in a group writes a portion of the project and then pastes his or her individual contributions together to form a patchwork product with only the barest indications of being coauthored.
>
> 3. The writing task must be designed so that it is sufficiently complex and challenging--it must truly require the combined efforts of a group to be completed successfully. The real value of collaborative writing should be that it provides the "good learning" (Vygotsky) which is in advance of development. Collaborative writing projects, when incorporated wisely, allow learners to bridge what Vygotsky has called the "zone of proximal development": "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (*Mind in Society* 86). Collaborative writing projects should be incorporated into the classroom with Vygotsky's notion of the zoped in mind.

I believe that engaging students in collaborative research about their writing processes fulfills the demands of these criteria. Certainly, the teacher provides the impetus for the collaborative research project, but the teacher's role is merely to spark an interest in the role of writing in the students' lives. I assert that initiating students into the arena of discourse study is still engaging them in authentic "problem-posing" situations, to use Freire's term (71), because the content of their research comes from their own lives and much of the responsibility for structuring their learning is their own. This collaborative project is a liberatory one, undergirded by the belief that "Education starts from the experiences of the people, and either reinforces or challenges the existing social forces that keep them passive" (Wallerstien 33). In this case, the students

investigations of their writing processes challenges existing educational structures by asking them to reflect upon how their writing has changed since they were freshmen, and how their composing patterns have been altered or shaped by various contexts and constraints: the nature of the subject matter, the influence of work in their lives, their commitment to a course, their respect for the instructor and so on. Thus, there is a great deal of self-reflexiveness built into the projects: the students do not passively complete an assignment, but investigate a crucial component of their intellectual development.

Furthermore, this collaborative project requires that students engage in dialogue about language and that they write about writing. Consequently, students are immersed in a high level of metalanguage. As Ruggles Gere has pointed out in her study of writing groups (1987), one of the key benefits of writing groups is that they situate students in an environments rich with metalanguage. She cites Robert Sternberg's study of intelligence tests (1984) and asserts:

> As a result of this negotiation within writing groups, participants develop metalanguage about writing. Metalanguage, or language about language, contributes significantly to what cognitive psychologists call metacognition. . . . Current discussions of human intelligence argue that metacognition (the ability to monitor one's own thinking) constitutes a major factor in mental ability because people who are aware of how they think perform better than those who do not. (95)

It follows, then, that students who are aware of how they write will write better than those who do not have this heightened perspective. And, when students are made investigators of language, they achieve this elevated awareness of how discourse functions. Furthermore, students not only enter into the arena of metalanguage; when engaging in these projects, they also must reflect on their educational experience thus far. Students rarely have occasions stop, take a breath, and examine how they are situated in the academy as they clamor to get the right classes, amass the right credit hours, garner good grades , and develop job skills. Passivity generally runs rampant among college juniors and seniors--they have either become so obsessed with getting a degree that they have failed to notice limitations in their education, or they realize the weaknesses that exist but retreat to a cynical apathy concerning the state of higher education. This collaborative project is designed to provide "conscientization," to open their eyes and make them understand that they have a responsibility to expose the constraints of education. At the risk of introducing yet another chic

neologism in the composition vernacular, I want to assert that this project encourages another kind of critical thinking as well, the ability to achieve what I would call "metaeducational awareness." In the Freirean sense, this project encourages the students to probe the strengths and limitations of the institutional community, and hopefully incites them to work for change and transform that community where necessary.

Collaborative Research in Action: The Students' Findings

I would like now to present some of the findings from the students collaborative research on the writing processes of juniors and seniors. Students organize their research in a variety of ways: some follow the outline on the assignment sheet; some present a hypothetical situation containing an invented "typical" student who encompasses all the traits they discover; while others presents three or four cases of different students' strategies to the same type of writing assignment. Thus, my strategy for recapitulating their findings will be one in which I highlight consistent patterns of discovery, rather than offering any formal hierarchical breakdown of their findings.

Grades and the Writing Process

One theme that seems to run rampant through the students' collaborative research is that no consistent composing process is employed by any of the third or fourth-year writers, and whatever process is employed is inextricably tied to its efficacy in attaining an acceptable grade. In spite of any attempts to impart in first-year composition courses what we may believe are more effective or efficient writing strategies, students revert to their own idiosyncratic composing habits when faced with the constraints of producing writing in various disciplines. As one group concluded, "we found that we were open to new techniques when first introduced to them. However, under pressure we always relied on our ingrained habits of writing rather than develop the new techniques we learned." As Ronald and Volkmer asserted, grade anxiety is the underlying factor in shaping a students' writing process--students in these collaborative case studies continually used the final grade received on a paper as a yardstick for the efficacy of their writing processes. This tendency begins earlier in their college careers. If they found that that they could procrastinate until

the night before a paper was due, compose it in a single, caffeine-stimulated "all-nighter" at the computer, and still receive a high grade, then that process became their preferred method of composing. In fact, many students stated that the "all-nighter" was essentially the only way the could compose more substantial discourse. Also, though some students disagreed as to what a stable definition of "procrastination" is, most of them maintained that they procrastinated because it worked:

> Students do not like to follow the rules because procrastination usually works for them. Most students are basically out to get the grade. In one case, a student stated that even though he always waits until the last minute, he always seems to do fairly well.

This is not to say that all students wrote in this fashion, though; some did indeed begin their work early and used some prewriting and drafting. But again, grades were the determining factor in relying on one writing process over another. As one group concluded, "grades play an important role in students' writing processes. . . . the percentage of the final class grade that an assignment is worth matters most to most students, including ourselves."

Interest in Course Equals Commitment to Writing

Another consistent theme that threaded its way through the students' research was a definite correlation between their interest in the class or the writing assignment and the amount of energy expended in writing. Students in the studies had no trouble detecting vacuous writing tasks, the purpose of which was to merely regurgitate information or to try to impress the instructor by feigning interest in a his or her pet theory or hobby horse. As one student bluntly stated,

> I hate when teachers decide what I will write about. It's even worse when they assign a topic for a research paper, because they usually assign something they are interested in. I can honestly say I have never been interested in any research paper I worked on.

Another group went on at length in describing the sorry state of writing assignments in various courses:

> Given the results from the informal groups' rough drafts and our formal group's final drafts, along with what has been seen and heard of in college writings, there seems

> to be one predominant style of writing. This style should be called 'The Do-Exactly-What-the-Teacher-Wants Method,' or 'The Get-the-Grade-and-Forget-Creativity Method.' Examples worthy of this sarcasm are plentiful in our own case studies. As one student puts it, "All papers we wrote had to be done in a certain way." This student goes on to tell about a dreaded list of writing rules that had to be strictly adhered to. Another, more pitiful example was that of a student who had to rewrite an entire 15-20 page paper because the teacher told her she was doing everything wrong. What this seems to boil down to is more than just bad grammar, lack of punctuation, or run-on sentences. It seems to be a matter of a student's writing. Students do not often get to choose a subject which they enjoy writing about; and when they do not, the quality of writing is seriously lacking.

In all fairness, I must point out that we do not hear the teachers' side of the story in these cases (and of course the teachers remained anonymous); however, the student researchers' overwhelming cynicism is undeniable. The value of having students research writing across the disciplines is obvious--from these statements we can see they have a unique perspective on academic writing. With two or more years of experience in the academy they can clearly identify weaknesses in the system, and their research problematizes our notion of that monolithic term "academic writing." When we argue that the purpose of an introductory or advanced composition class should be to prepare students to write in the academy, we are overlooking weaknesses in the existing system. Certainly our job is not to introduce them to the constrictive, unauthentic writing that is apparently being forced upon them now--perhaps we should make them more aware or their responsibility to demand writing tasks that are purposeful and genuine.

Other Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

Certainly the findings of the students' research were not entirely negative; many students did mention that they used extensive planning activities, began their work early, used drafts, and were seriously committed to writing projects which they felt had some relevance. Also, many reported that professors in myriad disciplines were designing writing assignments which required cooperative learning, though not all instructors who used collaboration in their classes had adequately prepared for the difficulties associated with learning in groups. There were numerous accounts in their research of "collaborative papers" that were essentially written by one conscientious person.

I would like to conclude by reiterating the multifaceted value of this collaborative research of writing. First, having students investigate their writing practices provides some content for the advanced composition course, a course that has traditionally been rather amorphous in structure. Next, students become co-inquisitors in the process of research; by placing their work in the context of recent research in composition, such as Ronald and Volkmer's work, they realize that they share the authority for making knowledge in the field. Finally, the students are engaging in what Donald Bialostosky has called "reflective practice" (16). They are examining the structures that shape their discourse from a heightened perspective, immersing themselves in the politics of teaching discourse, and hopefully using their research as an impetus for change in writing practices across the discipline.

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